



Nutrition & African Dance: Synthesizing Health In A Whole New Way

Families of African American Ancestry Manifesting Our Excellence

Fame Gets Moving With African Dance

**By ANNETTE WELLS,
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Sunday, February 23, 2003**

There were no jump ropes or basketballs, but the county Public Health Department provided just enough music to get youngsters' hips swaying.

At least one 8-year-old understood the impact such shaking can have on a person's dance education as well as on physical fitness.

"I like moving my hips," said La'shena Greys of Rialto. "The hip-shaking is my favorite part. I can learn to dance well if I can move my hips."

La'shena was among two dozen children at the department's pilot dance program last week. Started this month, Families of African American Ancestry Manifesting our Excellence program, or FAME, promotes good nutrition and physical activity through African dance and nutritional awareness.

The group meets every day for an hour at various places in San Bernardino and Rialto.

In the black community dance has evolved as a way of delivering social messages, said nutritionist Teslyn Henry.

Chahn Chess, a dance instructor and nutritionist, agreed.

"We are using traditional African dance, such as drum music, as well as today's hip-hop music, minus any derogatory lyrics," he said. "Not only does it combat obesity, it can improve children's self-confidence."

Last year, a study released by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy on overweight and physically unfit children showed that nearly 40 percent of California's fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders were unfit.

In the 62nd Assembly District, which includes Rialto and most of San Bernardino, 51.4 percent of students surveyed were not physically fit, and 32 percent were overweight. Among blacks in the district, 45 percent were not physically fit and 26 percent were overweight, that study showed.

According to the county, San Bernardino and Rialto have the county's largest populations of low-income blacks, who have the county's highest death rates from cardiovascular disease. On Thursday, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a nationwide county-by-county report on stroke deaths by race from 1991 to 1998. Overall, Southerners and blacks had the highest number of deaths per 100,000 people.

In San Bernardino County, blacks age 35 or older were more likely to die from a stroke than people of any other race, the study showed.

Poor eating habits and lack of exercise are leading risk factors, health officials say.

"Our goal is to just encourage people to engage in some type of physical activity," Henry said. "And to encourage them to eat more fruits and vegetables."

Though it is primarily geared toward low-income black youth, all races are welcome to participate, as are adults, said nutritionist Elaine McFadden.

"On Tuesday nights, we have an adult class where many times we will see parents with their children," Henry said. "It's a good way for the family to get involved together."

In addition to the music and dance, health officials offer water, vegetables and some fruit.

Jerrette Jones, 7, of Rialto, said she knows the importance of eating vegetables and exercising.

"I try to eat a piece of fruit every day," she said as she ate some carrots from a bag given to her by McFadden. "I jump rope at school."

Alyssa Florez, 7, who attends Morgan Elementary School in Rialto with Jerrette, said she was still having trouble touching her toes.

"I like to dance, but when we have to bend over and touch our toes, I can't do it," she said.

The program is offered at four sites in San Bernardino and two in Rialto.

For more information about the FAME program, call (909) 889-5180 or (909) 387-0175.

